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ABSTRACT

Despite a long history in the arts and humanities as curricular mainstays and a continuing presence as sociocultural mythological anchors, biographies and other forms of life writing have been neglected as sources for teaching educational leadership. Besides biographies, these include autobiographies, portraits, profiles, case studies, memoirs, diaries, and journals. This paper examines the reasons for their under-utilization and discusses emerging perspectives that foster a reexamination of the efficacy of life-writing materials as teaching tools for professors. It also comments on some of the exemplars of life writing and discusses the advantages to be gained from an expanded application in educational leadership curricula and pedagogy. For example, biography teaches context and helps establish and define the meaning (hermeneutics) of leadership; restores the human variable to the study of organizations; and is an excellent way to teach about moral leadership. Generally accepted criteria for selecting and critiquing biographies and other forms of life writing are also presented. These criteria include: (1) the angle of vision; (2) subjectivity or detachment; (3) the selection of materials and its impact on conclusions; (4) the use of background and historical context; (5) the use of grounded and traceable analysis to explain motive and cause; (6) the means used to portray the internal life; and (7) the application of appropriate methods in reconstruction as well as style (comprehensive, open, logical, inclusive, non-reductionistic, and non-polemical). Two figures are included. (Contains 75 references.) (LMI)

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Biography as a Focus for Teaching Leadership

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Running head: BIOGRAPHY AS A FOCUS FOR TEACHING

Abstract

Despite a long history in the arts and humanities as curricular mainstays and a continuing presence as socio-cultural mythological anchors, biography and other forms of life writing have been a neglected source in teaching educational leadership. This paper examines the reasons for their under-utilization, emerging perspectives which are fostering a re-examination of their efficacy and which can serve as teaching tools for professors, comments on some of the exemplars of life writing, and discusses the advantages to be gained from an expanded application in educational leadership curricula and pedagogy. It also presents generally accepted criteria upon which to select and critique biographies and other forms of life writing as "good" examples of each type of the genre.

Biography As a Focus for Teaching Leadership

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The utility of biography and other forms of life writing such as autobiography, portraits, profiles, memoirs, diaries and journals (Smith, 1994, pp. 286-305) have been well established for hundreds of years in the arts and humanities. One has only to consider the likes of Herodotus' The Persian Wars (1947), Thucydides' The Peloponnesian War (1951), Plutarch's Parallel Lives (no date), Machiavelli's The Prince and The Discourses (1950) and Carlyle's (1841/1935) On Heroes Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History to understand the impact of them on the classical collegiate curriculum. Indeed Western thinking has been framed in two documents of life writing. They are a portrait of Socrates as it emerges in Plato's Apology and Phaedo, and a portrait of Jesus of Nazareth as it emerges from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and recently within the newly discovered Gospel of Thomas unearthed in Egypt in 1945 (Funk, Hoover, the Jesus Seminar, 1993, p.5).

In addition, various forms of life writing were very common in the early curricula of elementary and secondary public schools in the United States. Works such as The Selected Dialogues of Lucian (1804), Xenophon's Anabasis (1851), The Oration of Demosthenes on the Crown (1897),

Cicero on Oratory and Orators (1897), or Caesar's Gallic War (1898) were commonly read by public school students. These books were translations of memoirs and diaries of events in the lives of great personages of antiquity. With few exceptions they have all but disappeared as major wellsprings of study in the modern curricula of both colleges and universities and most public secondary schools.

The Traditional Curriculum in Educational Administration

The traditional curricula in educational administration was centered on concepts of objectivist science which precluded these earlier forms of life writing from being considered "legitimate" sources for "professional preparation." First, departments of educational administration were concerned with distancing themselves from older curricular traditions for exclusionary purposes (see Schaefer, 1990, pp. 36-66) within emerging schools of education which were also competing for "turf" in the emerging American university (see Clifford and Guthrie, 1988). Secondly, the theoretical perspective regarding "science" cast biography and other forms of life writing into the trash can of "non-science" (see Getzels, Lipham and Campbell, 1968, pp. 1-22).

Professionalization in educational administration was envisioned idealistically as that of business management and the impressive efficiency of factories (Callahan, 1962). Efficiency as embodied in scientific management was the template for early professors of educational administration.

Their concept of "science," "research," and "efficiency" became synonymous and formed a triumvirate of privileged positions (Gross, 1964, pp. 33-72).

Testimony to the historical triumvirate's power lies in the continuing resistance to include biography and other forms of life writing as methods and appropriate sources in educational administration because they have been smeared by earlier brushes of "non-science." That the debunkers, notably Stogdill (1948) and Gibb (1954), were using positivistic assumptions and methods which have themselves been subsequently challenged as non-objective have remained largely unnoticed in creating the intellectual landscapes of the field (see Campbell, Fleming, Newell, and Bennion, 1987). In short, a study of leadership was dropped in favor of a study of the executive (see Jennings, 1960).

The strength of the dominant definition of science continues to shape even the minds of creative dissidents. For example, in describing the meaning of leadership as an act of interpretation consisting of direction setting, engagement, fit, and originality, Duke (1989) was forced to ascribe these properties to those of "aesthetics" instead of challenging the idea that the prevailing view of science in educational administration was not science at all, but an ideology. Capper (1992) has taken to calling positions outside of the dominant one, "otherist" perspectives.

A Brief Review of Some of The Forces of Change

Without going into substantial detail because of the requirements for brevity in this paper, there appear to be five basic thrusts for change that are creating the conditions to re-examine the field's historic antipathy against forms of life writing as curricular content, and as appropriate pedagogical tools. They are:

1. Increasing use of qualitative studies in doctoral level research with concomitant rejection of many tenets of objectivist science (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Smith, 1990; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), including efforts to de-center behaviorism/structuralism as only one kind of metanarrative possibility (English, 1994, pp. 99-132).

2. A documented failure to adequately deal with leadership (as opposed to management) from either a theoretical or practical manner (Rost, 1991; English, 1992).

3. Increasing concern with moral leadership and the absence of moral values in organizational theory (Foster, 1986; Green, 1987; Strike, Haller and Soltis, 1988; Maxcy, 1991; Hodgkinson, 1991, Sergiovanni, 1992, Greenfield and Ribbins, 1993).

4. Increasing concern with preparing a "reflective practitioner" who is critical of the underlying assumptions of practice (Schon, 1987).

5. Continuing criticism about the field's historic prejudices against women and minorities (Shakeshaft, 1987; Capper, 1993).

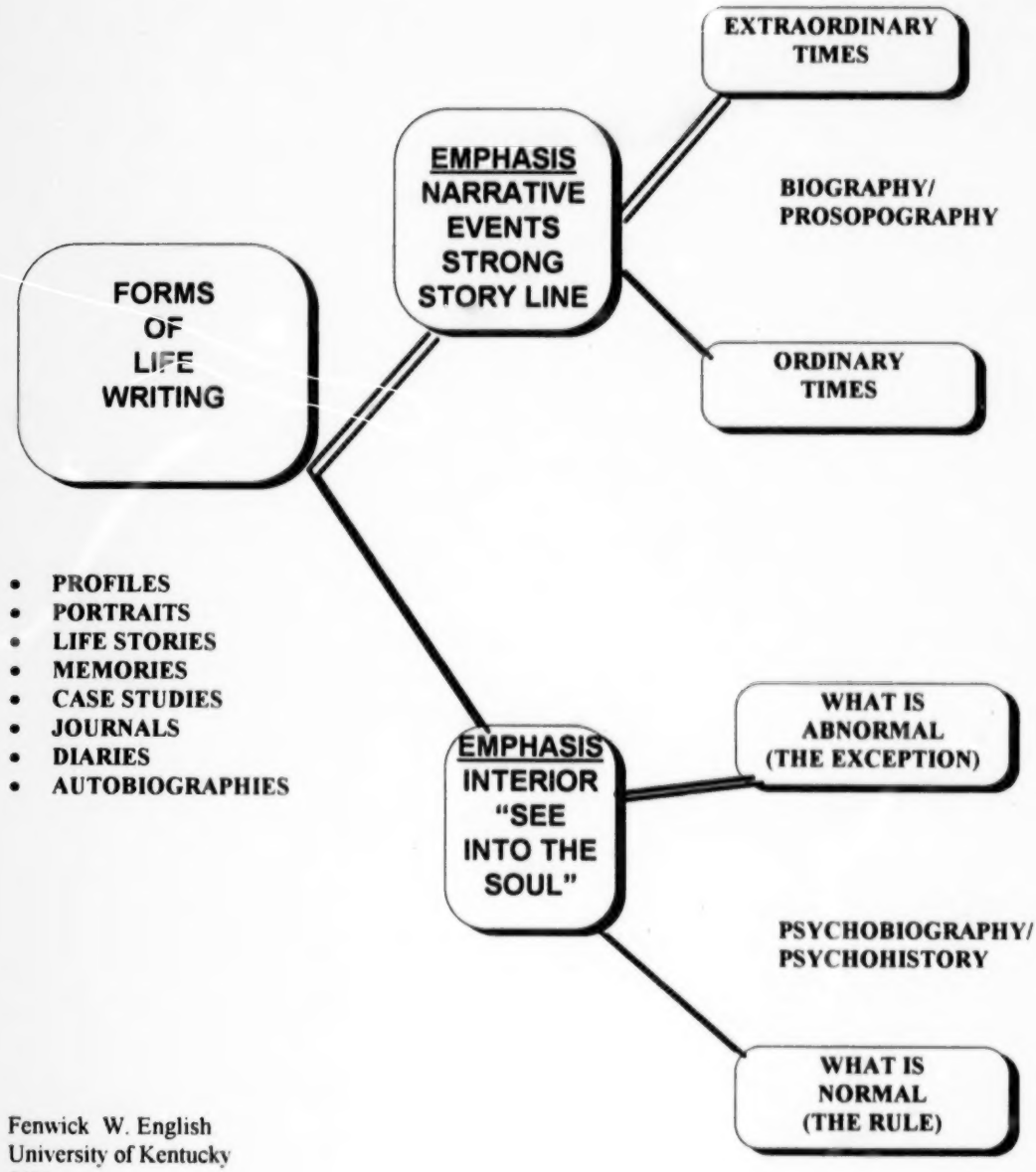
The Many Forms of Life Writing

Life writing has developed many forms, biography being simply one example. Beyond the traditional forms found in the humanities there are prosopography (group biography) and pathography (a study of pathology [disease] and biography (Park, 1994).

Early life writing as biography took two basic forms (see Exhibit 1 next page). The first emphasized a strong story line or narrative. In this view biography is a form of history or historiography. Narrative biography is more interested in achievement and events than psychic lives.

The second line is interested in exploring the "inner person" and private lives. Biographer Edmund Gosse (1903) spoke of biography as "the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life." Famed biographer Lytton Strachey whose book Iminent Victorians (1918) is considered a "classic," observed that the purpose of biography was to reveal, "the inward creature..the soul that sits behind the eyelids, upon the purpose and the passion that linger in a gesture or betray themselves in a word" (Novarr, 1986, p. 29). Modern biographers are concerned with what Leon Edel (1981) called, "the figure under the carpet." This metaphor referred to the necessity of the biographer to peer into the "private mythology" which is hidden in the biographee's

THE BRANCHES OF LIFE WRITING



- PROFILES
- PORTRAITS
- LIFE STORIES
- MEMORIES
- CASE STUDIES
- JOURNALS
- DIARIES
- AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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"private self" (Winkler, 1993). The process of "peering under the carpet" (Edel, 1979), has led to a modern biographer being accused of being a kind of "thief" (see Malcolm, 1993).

When the desire to peer into human interiority engages a formal system of psychological theory the result is psychobiography (Runyan, 1982, p. 201). Psychobiography can involve both individuals and groups. The first such work was Sigmund Freud's (1910) Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood. Some examples of contemporary psychobiographies are Cody's (1971) After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson, and Fawn Brodie's (1981) Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character.

Prosopography: The New Frontier

One of the exciting new frontiers for biography is prosopography, or group biography. Since it is generally recognized that an individual, no matter how brilliant, rarely works alone and is supported within a socio-cultural network of friends and accomplices, writing about more than one life builds important contextual as well as personal references for understanding the person and his/her human relationships within a given socio-cultural context and time period (see Peters, 1981).

Prosopography appears to be an excellent method for delving into the motives, personalities and characters of a movement, family, organization, government reform or program. One excellent example is a group ethnography of

educational innovators of Kensington Elementary School completed by Smith, Kleine, Prunty and Dwyer (1986). These researcher-prosopographers learned that innovators, as true believers, neither die nor fade away, and that the complexity of their belief systems represents the transformation of religious beliefs into secular educational reforms. This insight came as a significant breakthrough for the prosopographers' understanding of the lives of change agents in education (p. 291).

Unique Contributions of Biography to the Study of Educational Leadership

Based on a review of the literature of biography and some personal university classroom teaching experience with it, the unique contributions of biography in the teaching of educational leadership appear to be these:

1. Biography is a superb teacher of context and helps establish and define the meaning (hermeneutics) of leadership

Biography is a superb constructivist method for developing context. A well written biography is a re-construction of events within context, and can be illustrative of the choices a leader faced (see Boone, 1994). By probing the interior of a person the biographer can show the angle of vision a leader approached contexts in which decisions were generated and the moral and ethical dimensions of them.

2. Biography restores the human variable to the study of organizations

Organizational sociology/theory has de-humanized schools. Leaders have been reduced to nameless "actors" in a fruitless search for generalized, context free principles. Since the human variable is the most important one in the leadership equation, organizational sociology has trivialized it and reduced its predictive power. Biography restores the human variable to the position of the key variable. It can do this without succumbing to earlier forms of open hero worship some professors find repugnant with Carlyle (1841/1935) or ritualized heroics (Campbell, 1973).

3. Biography is an excellent way to teach about moral leadership.

Any discussion about teaching morality or morals in educational administration is troubled by questions regarding the nature of morals. Are they situational or transcendent? A claim for transcendence falls on the fallacy of ethnocentricism. A claim for morals using the Kantian categorical imperative strategy falls on Munchhausen's trilemma (infinite regress, dogmatism, and the vicious cycle problem within set theory) (See English, 1994, pp. 46-48). Habermas (1991) has shown that Munchhausen's trilemma can be negated on the basis of the performative contradiction (pp.78-93). It is therefore possible to re-conceptualize morals as pre-agreements forming the grounds for ethical

cognitivism. The performative contradiction is the basis to show the moral skeptic that morals already exist, even in the act of argumentation and denial.

Criteria Upon Which to Select a Good Biography

The generally accepted criteria upon which to choose a "good biography" (Novarr, 1986) are:

1. The angle of vision (clear, coherent).

2. The subjectivity or detachment of the biographer (the biographer does not "love" nor "hate" the biographee, nor was he/she unduly involved with him/her.

3. The selection of materials and its shaping (comprehensive, triangulated, traceable lines from data sources to the narrative line and/or judgmental statements or conclusions).

4. Use of background and historical context (accurate, explicit, relevant, inclusive).

5. Analysis to explain motive and cause (grounded in the data, context, connected to events, traceable).

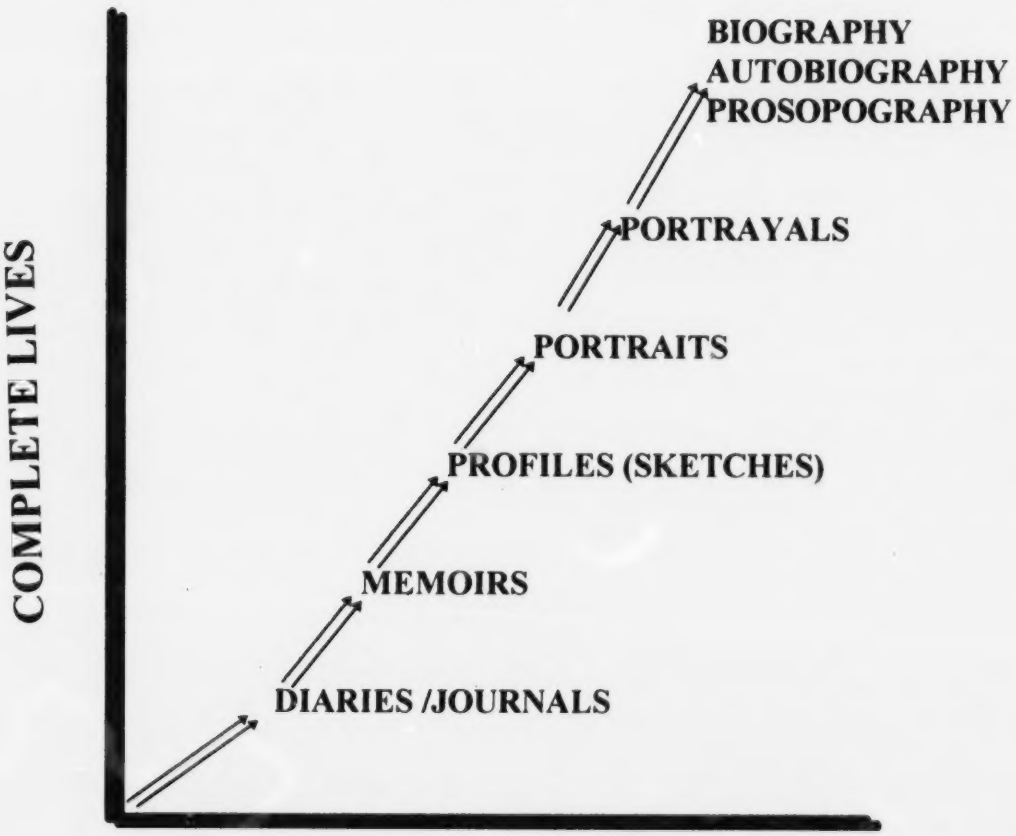
6. The means to get at the internal life (clear, coherent, formalized, plausible/supportable, logical).

7. Attempts at re-construction, style (comprehensive, open, logical, inclusive, non-reductionistic, non-polemical) (pp. xv-xvi).

A Partial List of Forms of Life Writing Applicable in Educational Administration

The various forms of life writing are shown in Exhibit II (next page) by the extent to which they deal with whole

FORMS OF LIFE WRITING
COMPLETENESS



lives, from biography to diaries and journals. Those that dwell nearly exclusively with educational administration are indexed below.

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